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**Title: Save (us from) the children: Trauma, Palestinian Childhood, and the production of governable subjects**

**Abstract:** Since the Second Intifada, trauma relief has served as the primary justification for a range of international humanitarian aid projects targeting Palestinian children and youth. Such humanitarian aid projects presume that the default response to violence is trauma, and that trauma left untreated will lead to aggression and violence. Thus, implicit in trauma relief projects targeting Palestinian children is the threat that if they are not properly treated their pent up emotional energy will release itself violently in the future. Moreover, the focus on personal healing through individual self-expression in trauma relief projects serves to depoliticize the context in which violence occurs, transforming the occupation into a set of symptoms to be treated. Likewise, the focus on individual trauma forecloses other possible responses to violence, including empowerment and resistance. Drawing on participant observer research with youth-oriented NGOs in Palestine, as well as with Palestinian children in a West Bank refugee camp, this research seeks to better understand the role of international NGOs in producing particular forms of childhood political subjectivity, and how children themselves variously perform and transform such discursive constructions of Palestinian childhood.

**Key Words:** Humanitarian aid, trauma, risk, resilience, resistance, Palestine

## Introduction

Given the longstanding, pervasive and multifaceted nature of political violence in occupied Palestine (PCBS 2011), and given the country's predominantly youthful population (PCBS 2013), it is no wonder that there exists a growing body of work investigating the psychological effects of violence on Palestinian children. While studies on the topic emerged in response to the violence of the first Palestinian *intifada* against Israeli military rule (1987-1993), this literature has expanded in the wake of intensified violence during the Second (*al-Aqsa*) Intifada beginning in September 2000, and more recently following the repeated Israeli assaults on Gaza since 2006. Such studies link exposure to fighting, bombardment, and house demolitions under occupation with anxiety, depression, and traumatic stress among Palestinian children (Qouta et al. 2007, Qouta, Punamäki, and Sarra 2003, Thabet, Abed, and Vostanis 2002).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Qouta and Odeh (2005) found that significant percentages of Palestinian children suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, with up to 55% suffering from acute levels of PTSD in areas exposed to heavy violence, while Khamis (2005) found that 54.7% of children had experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, and that 34.1% were diagnosed with PTSD (mostly male refugee youth). Given the widespread death and destruction witnessed during the al-Aqsa Intifada, Palestinian and foreign psychologists studying emotional and behavioral problems among children in the West Bank called for 'large-scale' clinical psychiatric interventions to 'overcome the deleterious effects' of living under occupation (Zakrisson et al. 2004). Humanitarian aid organizations responded to this crisis with emergency psychiatric support projects, and efforts to combat the lasting effects of psychological trauma, and the ongoing psychological stresses of life under occupation, continue.

Nevertheless, there continues to be debate about both the long-term psychological effects of violence and the ability of Palestinian young people to cope with and recover from it. For example, Punamaki (1996) found that the ideological and political commitments of young people helped them to cope with violence experienced during the first intifada. This finding supported earlier research by Baker (1991) who found that youths who actively participated in the intifada were better able to cope psychologically than their less involved peers. However, later research complicated these findings showing that participation in the intifada also led to increased risk taking and further exposure to violence, and thus potentially higher risk of psychological trauma as a result (Punamaki, Qouta, and El-Sarraj 2001). Other factors affecting youth resiliency have also been identified including capacity for creativity and problem solving (*ibid.*). Still, Qouta et al. (2007) emphasize that while the resiliency of Palestinian young people is indeed impressive, psychological stress can often have long-term effects that can become exacerbated without proper support. Stepping back from this debate, however, Nguyen-Gillham et al. (2008, 292) argue for a complete reframing of our understanding of trauma and resiliency in the first place. Within the Palestinian context, the authors argue, 'suffering and endurance have to be interpreted at both an individual and collective level',

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<sup>1</sup> These findings confirm similar research conducted in other areas that have experienced violent conflict. For example, research in Bosnia-Herzegovina following the Bosnian War has shown that children exposed to conditions of war saw increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression (see for example Rosner, Powell, and Butollo 2003, Smith et al. 2002).

rather than relying solely upon Western notions of individual psychological resiliency. Specifically, they argue that the response of the international donor community to the violence of the al-Aqsa Intifada has privileged predominantly Western understandings and models of trauma and psychological relief while downplaying ‘the collective resiliency of Palestinian youth and the practices of communal support and care’; the result has been to ‘distort the *social* suffering of war into *individual* illness’ (ibid.; see also Sousa and Marshall forthcoming).

Indeed, without diminishing the psychological effects of the occupation on Palestinians, we should bear in mind that trauma is the construct of particular medical and humanitarian aid knowledge/practices and as such is a contested political discourse. The discourse of trauma has been used to make visible (and thus politicize) the psychological and emotional violence of various forms of oppression that might otherwise remain invisible. Likewise, the psychological language of trauma has also (perhaps strategically) been used to *de*-politicize political violence, subjecting it to the realm of expert medical intervention. The question that motivates this paper is: how do Palestinian young people themselves understand the discourse of trauma in which their lives are so often framed? Specifically, what form of political subjectivity is mobilized when children are framed through the discourse of trauma, and what other ways of being political are rendered invisible? That is, what kinds of politics are enabled or disabled by trauma discourse? Finally, how do Palestinian children variously conform to, resist, evade, co-opt and transform this discourse, performing their own politics in the process?

In this paper I argue that trauma simultaneously serves as a political justification for humanitarian intervention but also represents a closure of political space, particularly for Palestinian children. Specifically I argue that trauma discourse positions Palestinian youths as security risks which must be mitigated through techniques of self-management. Implicit in trauma relief projects is the threat that children’s untreated psychological troubles and pent up emotional energy will be violently released in the future, perpetuating the representation of Palestinians as outside the space of reason (Gregory 2004). As such, Palestinian children are depicted as both at risk and also risky. The question thus arises as to whether the purpose of trauma relief projects is to protect Palestinian children, or protect against them. While the discourse of trauma originally served as justification for humanitarian solidarity with Palestinians in response to the violence of the Second Intifada, today trauma discourse serves the purpose of obscuring the violence of occupation, and imposing on Palestinian youth the responsibility of governing themselves. Trauma reduces the effects of occupation to a set of psychological symptoms and transforms a collective political struggle for self-determination into an individual struggle for self-esteem.

This paper begins with a brief history of trauma and its deployment in humanitarian projects in Palestine. In this discussion, I draw upon Rancière’s (2006, 2010) notion of ethical consensus and his critique of humanitarian ethics. Here I argue that trauma discourse serves to depoliticize the Israeli occupation of Palestine, while trauma relief projects targeting Palestinian children serve to mitigate the risk of traumatized children by producing governable, self-managing subjects. In this way, trauma can be understood as a spatial strategy attempting to keep unruly subjects in their place, confining children to the apolitical and non-threatening realm of childhood innocence. The question is raised, however, as to how Palestinian young people potentially exceed the ethical confines of trauma discourse. Turning to my empirical field work with Palestinian community youth centers, I

examine examples of how trauma discourse is used in projects targeting Palestinian children and how these projects mobilize de-politicized forms of childhood subjectivity. Finally, I draw upon ethnographic field work with Palestinian boys and girls living in a West Bank refugee camp to illustrate how children creatively perform and transform the discourses of trauma, suffering, and humanitarian aid in their own ways.

## **Trauma and humanitarianism**

With its roots in medical psychiatry emerging in the First World War, and later research on post-traumatic stress disorder with Holocaust survivors and Viet Nam War veterans (Argenti-Pellin 2003, Fassin and Rechtman 2009, Edkins 2003, Kaplan 2005), trauma has arguably become the ‘dominant paradigm for understanding the processes of victimization, remembering, witnessing, and recovery’ in our time (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 9). As Ahmed and Stacey (2001, 1) contend, ‘speaking out about injustice, trauma, pain, and grief, have become crucial aspects of contemporary life’, and have in turn ‘transformed notions of what it means to be a subject, what it means to speak, and how we can understand the formations of communities and collectives’ (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 2). While speaking about trauma has been a politically useful tool in mobilizing political communities and bringing to light concealed forms of coercive power (as in the case of domestic violence, which feminist activists have worked to change from a private family affair to a legal and public health issue), a question nevertheless arises as to what kinds of political subjectivities are mobilized by this politics of injury and suffering.

Beyond its role in political struggles in the West, Schaffer and Smith observe that the Western psychoanalytical model of trauma has been ‘enlisted in human rights frameworks’ and spread ‘through global circuits into dispersed local sites’ to address the deleterious psychological effects of a range of violent crises and disasters (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 5). The psychoanalytical model of trauma relief, which involves survivors telling their stories of suffering, reinforces the juridico-legal practices of human rights advocacy, with its emphasis on witness and testimony. Thus, the language of trauma provides medical justification for external humanitarian intervention while simultaneously delivering a discursive frame for representing the humanitarian suffering of distant others. The result is that a very specific cultural and historic understanding of trauma and human rights has been ‘transformed into a near-universal set of theories and practices’ used to treat and represent suffering (Thompson 2009, 56).

However, the coupling of trauma discourse and humanitarianism is not merely a global diffusion of particular legal and psycho-therapeutic practices, but rather, as Rancière (2010) argues, is indicative of a wider ethical turn in contemporary politics. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of human rights has formed a triumvirate with liberal democracy and the market economy in dominating the global landscape of the so-called post-historical world (Rancière 2010, 62). Unencumbered by the drive of progress, emancipation or any other ‘end to be accomplished,’ the ethical turn in politics is first of all marked by a ‘reversal of the flow of time,’ from a fixation on the future ‘towards the catastrophe behind us,’ in the form of trauma. Trauma, Rancière (2010) argues, ‘knows of neither innocence nor guilt’ but rather ‘lies in a zone of indistinction between guilt and innocence, between psychic disturbance and social unrest’ (186). Thus, trauma serves as both the aesthetic motif of the contemporary ethical turn and the practical framework for carrying out the forms of treatment and mediation that have come to replace political struggle and liberation. In this sense, the ethical turn that characterizes contemporary politics actually represents an ‘erasure of politics’ and the ‘shrinkage of political space,’ as questions of right dissolves into concerns over fact (Rancière 2009, 72, 189-90).

There is perhaps no better example of humanitarian intervention de-politicizing contentious political conflict than that of humanitarian aid to Palestine, the site of multiple and competing past catastrophes and victimizations. However, the role of trauma in mobilizing and sustaining this humanitarian response is more complex and ambiguous than Rancière's critique allows. As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) argue, the move toward trauma relief in humanitarian aid to Palestine was part of a wider 'ethical shift' that recognized physical and psychological pain not merely as medical symptoms but moral and political categories (174-177). The medical discourse of psychological trauma provided the justification for intervention by international humanitarian organizations whose work involved not only treating the physical and mental scars of war, but also representing the suffering they witnessed. Given the severity of the crisis in Palestine, the level of violence that the Israeli occupation was inflicting upon a largely civilian urban population, and the inaction and complicity on the part of Western governments, humanitarian organizations were compelled to intervene in any way possible. Since Palestinians were already relatively well equipped to handle emergency medical situations, intervention in the nascent mental health sector was one way that international health and humanitarian aid practitioners could help (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 190). Thus, humanitarian relief served a dual purpose: providing care for people who had endured violence and suffering, and bearing witness within the international public sphere to the violence and suffering that the occupation was inflicting; humanitarian intervention as 'political gesture' and 'clinical act' (Fassin and Rechtman, 192). Here, the portrayal of Palestinians as worthy victims of human rights abuses (as exemplified by the image of women and children being brutalized by the Israeli military) represents an aesthetic disruption to the dominant ethical consensus in which Israelis are the perpetual righteous victims *par excellence*. Nevertheless, as much as this aesthetical framing enabled a new kind of visibility for the Palestinian cause on the world stage, it also delimited the Palestinian political space with new ethical parameters.

In seeking to both portray and intervene in the human suffering of Palestinians, the discourse of humanitarian trauma places Palestinians in an ethical sphere of exception, as merely human, unable to uphold their own rights, relying instead on international experts to do so for them. Moreover, while individual stories of victimization and abuse draw attention to human suffering, such discourse also often distracts from the wider context of political violence. The discourse of suffering victims 'on both sides' depoliticizes the violence of occupation and obscures the massive asymmetries in power between occupied and occupier (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 202-205). Likewise, in addition to the way the trauma delimits political action, there is also the issue of reducing survivors of violence to a pathologized subjectivity, the assumption being that debilitating trauma is the default response to violence. In this way, the diversity of responses to and interpretations of violence, as well as of resiliency and survival, are reduced to a common narrative of individual suffering and trauma. However, not only is there an assumption that all children growing up under occupation are traumatized, but also that their trauma will re-emerge in the form of future violence and aggression if not properly treated in the present. As Qouta et al. (2008, 231) suggest, this 'belief that war violence begets individual aggression' represents an 'intuitive view that the human mind is a reflection of outside reality' and that 'when you live with violence, you become violent yourself, too.' As such, trauma discourse produces an image of a threatened but also threatening Palestinian child. As a form of governmental risk management then, trauma relief projects targeting Palestinian children define a particular problem – the traumatized and potentially aggressive Palestinian children – and mobilize a specified set of techniques for mitigating this problem, namely interventions which have as their aim the creation of rational and self-managing subjects (Lemke 2001). Thus the

problem of the occupation is transformed into a psychological matter, and the psyche of the Palestinian youth is transformed into the 'terrain of intervention' (Cruikshank 1999).

While Fassin and Rechtman's study focuses on the role of major international NGOs in carrying out humanitarian psychiatric relief in Palestine, what is not captured by their study is how ubiquitous the language of trauma has become at every level of civil society in Palestine, including smaller Palestinian community-based organizations. As Abourahme (2011) points out, the adeptness with which Palestinian community organizations navigate and negotiate the language of international donors is indicative of the flexibility and creativity that Palestinian refugees must use for survival. Nevertheless, as Feldman (2009) argues, humanitarian discourse limits as much as enables political maneuverability by requiring victims to surrender their political agency in order to be perceived as exemplary, innocent victims worth of sympathy. As archetypal innocent victims of violence how do Palestinian children understand the discourse of humanitarian suffering and trauma? Before turning to the empirical research where this question is explored in depth, we first must consider the methodological issues that arise when seeking to understand how children variously perform and transform discourses of trauma and humanitarian suffering through their everyday spatial practices, and debates relating to the nature of research in children's political geographies more broadly.

## **Methods**

By examining how humanitarian trauma discourse is both reproduced and challenged by Palestinian refugee children, this research seeks to combine the analysis of childhood discourse with participatory research with children (Kallio 2007). Doing so necessarily involves combining multiple research methods in multiple sites. To understand the limits and effects of trauma discourse I used a combination of critical discourse analysis and participant-observer research with youth-centered humanitarian organizations. To examine how Palestinian young people reproduce, understand, and rework humanitarian trauma discourse in their daily lives and spaces I used a variety of qualitative ethnographic research tools, including focus group interviews and visual methodologies. In this section I will explain the use of these methods, and debates surrounding their potential limitations.

The first task of this research was to examine the construction of childhood trauma in humanitarian aid discourse, and the mobilization of particular childhood subjectivities through this discourse. I understand discourse in its performative and material sense, as embedded in embodied spaces, actions, and habits (Foucault 1978, Butler 1993, Sullivan 2001). Thus, I combined critical discourse analysis of written texts, including funding proposals, reports, and websites (Fairclough 1995), with participant observation in order to examine the re-production of these discourses in everyday and practice (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). Combining textual discourse analysis with practice-based participant observation allows us to gain critical appreciation of the prevailing attitudes and rules governing the production of discourses, including the ways in which certain notions remain unchallengeable while others become unutterably (Waitt 2005). Moreover, rather than merely extracting and critiquing knowledge in isolation, this level of embedded participation allowed for ongoing, collaborative engagement and reciprocity with my Palestinian colleagues.

As a participant observer, I spent two years working alongside Palestinian staff and volunteers in a variety of youth-oriented NGOs and community centers helping to translate and develop many of the texts that I examine below. In addition to helping to produce these documents, I also helped to implement projects by working along staff, youth volunteers and child participants in carrying out the activities described in these proposals. This allowed me to understand how trauma relief projects were actually put into practice. Finally, I helped to document these activities, conduct project

evaluations with participants, and compile project reports. Again, this allowed me to understand how the practices and activities of youth centers in Palestine are couched in terms of trauma and humanitarian aid, and how they are measured and monitored through the scopic regimes of international donors.

While I engaged in continual critique of the documents that I helped to co-produce alongside my Palestinian colleagues, I also analyzed these documents using a more formal, text-based approach to critical discourse analysis. Following Skelton (2007), I began with an initial reading of a document to get a feel for the language. I then read the text again, this time coding for dominant themes that emerge, as well as stand-alone terms that get repeated without explanation ('violence' and 'trauma' being two examples, as we will see below.) As Skelton (2007) advises, throughout this process questions are asked of the text, about what is present and what is being excluded or silenced. As for the text of project proposals and documents that I directly quote and analyze below, on none of them was I the original author - all of them were initially conceptualized and written by people other than me. While I do quote from projects proposals that I helped to draft, the parts that I quote from are the standard boilerplate sections, not areas where I have provided any unique insight. For many of the projects I discuss in this research I later wrote project reports for the organization as an 'outside investigator.' However, given my single, original authorship of those documents I chose not to include them in my direct textual analysis (although a case could be made for doing so.)

Given the rapport I had developed with the Palestinian NGOs with whom I worked, I was afforded a great deal of trust and support in carrying out research directly with the children who participate in their activities. The organizations and community centers that I worked with were based in and around the northern West Bank city of Nablus and nearby Balata Refugee Camp. I chose Balata refugee camp as the site for my research with Palestinian children, not only because of my familiarity with the organizations working there, but also for the prevalence of internationally funded projects and other community initiatives in the camp, as well as the recent, traumatic violence this area endured during the Second Intifada (Weizman 2007, Gregory 2004). As the largest refugee camp in the West Bank, it has become simultaneously synonymous with humanitarian suffering and anti-occupation resistance.

In Balata camp, I partnered with 3 community centers that serve families, children, and youth: a village/neighborhood association established as a mutual aid society following the *Nakba* of 1948; a community association and medical clinic organized during the first intifada; and a youth center set up to provide a space to youth during the al-Aqsa Intifada, with some support from international donors. All three organizations carry out psychological support projects in partnership with an international humanitarian organization based in Nablus. In these three centers I established research groups with children: 2 groups of girls, 2 groups of boys and 2 mixed groups of girls and boys, all aged 10-14 years of age. Every group consisted of six children each who participated in the research activities, making for a total of about 36 participants (some children joined and left the project at different phases). The children who participated in this research were also participants in the trauma relief projects run at the centers where we met, although their participation in both was determined by a diagnosis of traumatic stress, but rather because they showed up and expressed an interest in being involved in the activities taking place at the youth center. I met the children as a participant observer in the activities run at the center and invited them (with parental consent) to participate in a research group exploring the lives and spaces of children in Balata camp. The research group consisted of activities similar to the ones they participated in at the youth center (art, film, and video projects), with the addition of child-led photo-tours of the camp (Loebach and



Gilliland 2010) and focus group interviews where we would discuss issues raised and materials produced in these activities.<sup>2</sup>

In the research groups we combined focus group interviews with drawing, mental mapping, journaling, photo-diaries, participatory video, and child-led photo tours of the camp to understand the various discourses that infuse the lives, spaces, and everyday activities of children in Balata camp. Given that trauma is both a psychological and emotional response to images and events, as well as an aesthetic affect-organizing motif, it was important to gain an understanding of the visual and symbolic imaginaries through which children interpret their lives and daily activities, as well as emotions and feelings associated with spaces in the camp.<sup>3</sup> While visual and creative methods are often seen as being particularly ‘child friendly’ (Young and Barrett 2001, Rudkin and Davis 2007), there is nothing to suggest that these techniques are *only* valuable for use with young people, or that they are necessarily the most appropriate tools for research with children. As Habashi (2008, 2011, 2012) has demonstrated, Palestinian children prove themselves to be adept at relating political, religious, and historical narratives to their own personal experiences through research interviews. However, this adeptness and familiarity with political narratives can also be a potential barrier to research exploring how children contest and disrupt such narratives. In part, I wanted to go beyond the familiar script that is often played out between Palestinian youths and foreign adults asking questions, be they aid workers, journalists, or researchers (Allen 2009). As Wilkinson (1998) points out, focus groups produce a research space in which discourses can be debated and contested, and where the co-construction of truths and interactive truth-checking takes place. Rather than merely relaying information to a foreign researcher, children in the focus groups actively debated that information and what kind of story they would construct for me. By combining focus groups interviews with visual methods, children were able to both construct and critique the aesthetic motifs and narratives often associated with trauma and humanitarian suffering. As with the documents above, I used a grounded, and iterative approach to analyzing our focus group discussions, raising questions that would feed into later focus group sessions (research groups meet twice weekly for 3 months.)

As Allen (2009) reminds us, visual representations of suffering, in particular children’s suffering, are central to the formation of Palestinians’ rights-bearing political subjectivity, and thus play a key role in mediating the response of the international community. In this way, visual methods are not used here as blank canvasses upon which children can create their own unique visions, nor as objective lenses through which we can glimpse the real lives of children in Palestine (Maclure et al. 2010). Rather, drawing, video, and photography are all practices through which dominant aesthetic motifs, discourses, and scopic regimes are reproduced, but also potentially transformed. Thus, following Thompson (2007) and Kullman (2012), I see creative and visual methods as being performative, spatial/discursive practices in and of themselves; discourses which are performed, played with, and parodied through the very material, embodied practices of research. This contradicts Ansell’s (2009) contention that the use of visual and creative methods in children’s geography perpetuates a myopic

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<sup>2</sup> All research activities and focus groups were conducted in Arabic. I am conversational in Arabic and was able to conduct focus group interviews and child-led tours in the local dialect, although I also relied upon the help of a local research assistant who would help with translation and clarification as needed.

<sup>3</sup> Rather than confining our discussion solely to the themes of violence, trauma, and suffering, our focus group discussions explored issues the children themselves were interested in and the questions they thought I should be asking, within the overall heading of everyday life in Balata camp. Themes of violence, resistance, psychological trauma, and resiliency were repeatedly raised in these focus groups, but were by no means the only topics discussed (see Marshall 2013).

focus on the micro-geographies of children's lives and spaces, blind to broader social and political processes. As we will see further below, broader discourses of trauma and suffering were critiqued by Palestinian children in this research using the very visual medium through which such discourses are perpetuated.

### **Trauma and risky subjects**

Images and discourse about the Palestinian child materialize and circulate in a variety of formats and forums. The discourse of childhood trauma, and the associated practices of trauma relief, is produced through project funding proposals, project reports, and public-facing websites, all of which bring the Palestinian child into view for a humanitarian donor public. In producing and examining this discourses constructed in these texts, three overall themes emerge: 1) the invisibility of the occupation as a source of violence; 2) the potential violence and aggression of Palestinian children if left untreated; and 3) the view that individual creativity and personal self-expression are the keys to releasing children from the emotional and psychological stress of violence. While the language of trauma has been used to highlight the hidden, psychological scars of war, paradoxically, this focus on human suffering and individual healing can obscure the very context of occupation (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, Argenti-Pellin 2003). Moreover, while trauma discourse has created space for the Palestinian narrative of suffering to be heard, trauma relief interventions create an image of the Palestinian child as not only vulnerable to suffering, but also as potentially vulnerable to creating suffering. Either victim or victimizer, Palestinian children are to be transformed into self-regulating individuals, leaving them very little room for other forms of collective political action or engagement.

Rather than being used to draw attention to the violence of occupation, the language of trauma is used to sanitize any perceived political content of work with children and youth, providing instead a sterilized medical discourse that reassures foreign donors. For example, in a project proposal by a youth-oriented NGO in Balata camp the organization states that the 'target group' for the project, meaning children and youth, 'suffers from past and on-going violence' leading to 'educational, social and behavioural problems [...] and to the development of negative psychological conditions.' Similarly, a proposal for an afterschool program in Askar refugee camp near Nablus targets 'children between the ages of 8 – 11 who suffer from violence, or whose families suffer from harsh economic, social and psychological conditions.' Here, while a wider context of harsh conditions is alluded to, any specific mention of the occupation is silenced. Likewise, rather than potential sources of resilience and support, the family becomes part of the broader context of harsh conditions. While Palestinian children suffer from violence in a variety of contexts, in the home, school, and street, from a variety of sources, including family, teachers, and peers, the nature of this violence, and its potential relation to the violence of occupation and the overall context of displacement is left intentionally vague. Moreover, children are portrayed as passive victims of nameless violence, and thus in need of external intervention, rather than as political subjects capable of understanding, resisting, and healing from violence as members of wider political community.

Beyond this assumption that Palestinian children are always already traumatized by unnamed violence, there is also an implicit threat about what will happen if this deep-seated trauma is not addressed. This can be seen in the example above, where past violence and suffering leads inevitably to social and behavioral problems. For example, the mission statement of an internationally funded Palestinian NGO targeting 'war affected children and youth' states that they seek to improve the 'the physical and mental health' of children by providing 'alternatives to violence' and a safe space for children to 'release frustration.' Here, it is assumed that Palestinian children have no alternatives to

violence already, and that external intervention is needed, not to protect Palestinian children, but merely to deflect their inevitably violent reactions by giving them other more productive tools to cope with their subjugation.

The threat of violent children is also implicit in another funding proposal submitted to an international donor for an art therapy and education program run by a Nablus-based NGO. The goal of the project, the proposal states, is to ‘improve the psycho-social health of marginalized Palestinian children from areas that have suffered violence, and to encourage tolerance and peaceful expression through the use of arts and other creative activities.’ The project goes on to state that such creative activities empower children through ‘the means of self-expression’ and provide ‘outlets for their energy and emotions.’ Here again the assumption is that Palestinian children lack the means to peaceful expression, that cultural intolerance (as opposed to military occupation) is the underlying cause of strife in Palestine, and that children have potentially dangerous and irrational emotions and energy that must be channeled into positive, creative and productive pursuits, rather than the inevitable alternative: violence and destruction.

Self-expression is similarly emphasized in a computer-related project run by the same organization. In a proposal to an international donor, the organization makes an appeal to funding for a computer education program on the grounds that internet-related activities can be a form of ‘psychological support’ as blogging provides a medium of self-expression that allows students to ‘deal with their own personal trauma,’ thus ‘strengthening the child’s psychological coping mechanisms’ and equipping them with ‘new confidence to take control of their lives.’ Interestingly, in addition to the ‘Mental Health’ goals of the blogging project, other goals included learning valuable language skills and promoting peace. As the project description puts it, ‘Education in emergencies’ not only ‘helps to heal the pain of bad experiences,’ but is also useful to ‘build skills, and support conflict resolution and peace-building.’ Specifically, ‘learning a new language’ instils a ‘new sense of confidence’ in children, and is likewise ‘of vital importance in the Arab world due to the high demand of fluency in the workplace.’ So, here we see the logic of the market overriding the irrationality of Palestinian youth – if we empower children through language learning they will be peaceful and productive workers. Here, we see an example of what Prasad and Prasad (2012) refer to as the ‘recurrent anxiety of slippage between the “best global citizen” and the terrorist’ often conjured up in the flat-world geographic imaginary of neo-liberal globalization (352). International donors are presented with an ultimatum: help mould Palestinian children into productive global citizens, or allow them to become global terrorists.

As we can see then, a connection is made in trauma relief programs between individual healing and personal productivity. As a youth media education project puts it, the goals of the program are ‘to provide psychological relief and a productive means of self-expression to children and youth who have suffered trauma and other effects of violence and conflict,’ and to give children the tools to ‘transcend personal barriers, such as trauma and lack of self-confidence, through self-exploration and personal development.’ Here, the violence of occupation is reduced to a set of personal psychological symptoms and individual developmental hurdles to be overcome through self-expression and improved self-esteem which are valued as being more productive.

In these examples, Palestinian children are assumed to be always already traumatized by an unnamed violence that, if left untreated, will produce a generation of potentially unruly, Palestinian youths, capable of launching another violent uprising. The solution is to equip them with the means to govern themselves through self-expression, personal growth, and even professional development. However, as we will see in the next section Palestinian children not only have different

interpretations and responses to the violence of occupation, but they also use the discourses and practices associated with humanitarian aid in ways that open rather than close the space of politics.

### **Transforming the discourse of trauma**

In seeking to understand how children make sense of humanitarian trauma discourse, and understand the violence of occupation in their own way, my ethnographic research with children revealed a set of challenges to the prevailing assumptions of many trauma relief projects. First of all, while children acknowledge the psychological suffering that results from the violence of occupation and the harsh living conditions it imposes, children also demonstrate a variety of responses to this violence including empowerment and resistance. In addition, while trauma relief projects seek to create well-balanced, empowered, and productive Palestinian youths through projects which emphasis individual creative self-expression, Palestinian youth take the creative tools they learn in such projects and enroll them in a politics of anti-occupation resistance. While Palestinian refugee children value individual creativity and skill, such attributes are valuable not solely to a project of self-improvement, but also to the politics of liberation. Indeed, community solidarity is privileged as a form of resiliency in the face of occupation, and children play a central role in helping maintain that solidarity.

This language of collective resiliency and resistance animated focus group discussions and other research activities carried out with Palestinian refugee children as part of this research. For example, in a focus group interview conducted with boys and girls at a youth center in Balata Camp, before I could start with my questions, 12 year old Wafa had questions of her own for me: ‘So, do you want to just know about the bad things in Balata, or the good too? Because it’s important for you to see the bad things about the occupation, about how people suffer, but also how we live together and help each other.’ Here, Wafa acknowledges the suffering of Palestinian refugees, but is quick to underscore the active process of living and caring for each other that Palestinian refugees carry out each day. When talking specifically about the negative effects of the occupation, though, Wafa’s friend Shireen talked about the psychological effects, such as fear: ‘It’s not as bad as it was during the intifada, but the army still comes at night, there is shooting and they use grenades, it effects the children, especially the young ones.’ Wafa agreed ‘Until now you can still find injured people from the intifada, injured psychologically as well. When you see someone killed, or your house destroyed, that will affect you forever. A child who is injured or witnesses violence, that will stay with him his whole life.’ But in speaking about their own personal experiences, the girls and boys explained that different people have different emotional responses to such violence. As Ihab, one of the boys in the group, put it: ‘For me, I was young during the intifada, so I don’t remember much – I remember shooting and people yelling, and I remember being scared, but it doesn’t affect me now. But other kids, it makes them nervous.’ Similarly, Shireen admits she was scared of the soldiers when they came to her house, but unlike Ihab she says the experience did have a lasting effect. As she describes it:

I still remember when the soldiers came to the house, they blew open the door with a bomb, and they took my older brother, and when the soldiers came back after a while they came and took my two uncles, one is still in jail, and the other one is living in Nablus now. I was young, so it affected me, my psychology (*nafs*). When they took my uncles, I was in 4th grade and I was very afraid. But when they came a second time to take my other brother I was in the 5th grade, I talked back to the soldiers, and he looked at me like he was going to hit me, then he started to go past me and I

started hitting him! [Laughs] I just started hitting and yelling at him to leave, and he was so shocked and confused. Then the soldiers started yelling at each other and they left! It's just something I became used to, you know? They try to scare you with their weapons so that you cooperate; they use psychology so we have to show them that we aren't afraid.

Here, rather than being depicted as a moment of injury in need of healing through education and self-expression, Shireen's encounter with the soldiers is described as being itself a moment of self-empowerment and education about occupation and resistance.

The theme of overcoming violence was explored in other research groups that I conducted with boys and girls in Balata camp, as well. However, rather than telling stories of individual empowerment and rather than depicting violence in terms of suffering and trauma, one group chose to depict overcoming violence as part of a collective, creative struggle against occupation. In a mixed research group of 3 boys and 3 girls, the children took pictures of places in the camp that they felt were in some way significant to them and their daily lives. The children then grouped the pictures into themes that would tell a particular story. This group chose to tell a story about Palestinian refugee children using the cramped spaces of the camp to create places of play. The children felt that such a story would acknowledge the difficult circumstances of life in the camp, while also highlighting the creativity and resilience of the people. As one girl put it, 'These pictures show our struggle, how despite the difficulties, we still have life, we have skills and interests.' Here, in the reference to skills, interests and overcoming difficulties, we see traces of the types of trauma relief projects cited above, which emphasize individual empowerment through education, expression and learning new skills. However, the reference to 'our struggle' suggests a more collective political alignment, and her defiant insistence that 'we still have life' resists both the erasure of Palestinian existence in Zionist narratives, and the focus on suffering and death foregrounded in humanitarian discourse.

[Figure 3: Photo- alley]

Beyond merely resisting the restricting frame of humanitarian suffering, however, this photography project completely inverts the geographic imaginary of humanitarian relief, in which active, globally-mobile experts dispense care and raise awareness about static, distant others. As Yasmine explains, she intends the photographs she took to serve as an inspiration for children in other parts of the world: 'When I think of kids in other places like in America, I think they probably have a lot of problems. Maybe they don't have the strong family and society like we have. And they feel weak. So when they see what we are doing, they will be inspired to be strong.' In Yasmine's rendering, far from being helpless victims, Palestinian children are the actors seeking to mobilize a message of solidarity and assistance to children in privileged countries who have their own problems but who may lack the resources to address them.

In this visual story of children's creativity and resilience in the cramped spaces of a refugee camp, most pictures depicted young boys playing soccer and riding bikes in narrow alleyways, and girls playing games in the confines of front doorsteps and rooftops. One picture, however, elicited disagreement between the boys and girls in the group. Nasr, one of the boys, objected to an image of a gun painted on an alley wall. 'I don't like this picture,' he said 'it's too violent, and it doesn't fit with the idea about how children play in the camp,' perhaps appealing to notions of childhood innocence and isolation from the adult world of political struggle. But Nisreen disagreed, 'No, it shows that there is freedom.' To which Nasr immediately objected 'What freedom? There's no

freedom here!’ Nisreen responded: ‘Of course not, but the picture shows that although we don’t have freedom, we still struggle, and we still have abilities. Like, we have the ability to create pretty pictures even on the walls of the camp.’ In this situation, rather than the gun representing repressive violence or trauma inflicted on children, or art being merely a means of individual self-expression, the ability to paint graffiti on the walls represents creative struggle against the circumstances of occupation and exile. Again, the representation of children being traumatized by violence is inverted, and the picture of the gun becomes a symbol of creativity and expression.

[Figure 4: Gun graffiti photo]

While this group debated the place of violence in their story about play in the camp, another research group sought to directly capture in photos and video what they refer to as *athar al-ibtal*, or effects of occupation – that is the physical and emotional traces of violence still imbedded in the landscape of the camp, such as bullet holes, martyr posters, and the blank spaces of destroyed homes. In this mixed research group of boys and girls, the children chose to conduct interviews with their neighbors, learning the stories of suffering and loss in the camp, not for external exhibition, but as an embodied, affective process of care and commemoration. One boy interviewed his neighbor whose brother was a fighter who was killed during the intifada, and whose family home was destroyed in punitive retribution by the Israeli army. As the boy explains: ‘The video we made isn’t for the people outside. It’s for the family and the people of the camp. Like something nice to give people to remember the martyrs.’ Beyond reproducing familiar visual representations of suffering for external viewing, or photographing traces of violence as part of personal catharsis, the act of representation becomes an interpersonal and intergenerational act of remembrance and solidarity, a gift give to neighbors and family members. Although projects that seek to relieve trauma in children often obscure and depoliticize the context of occupation, children use the creative means often employed in such projects, such as photography and video, to highlight the violence of occupation, and emphasize stories of resilience. Likewise, while children perform acts of empowerment and self-expression through these representations, the stories they tell deal with themes of collective struggle, memory, solidarity, and resilience. Finally, rather than being passive, immobile victims in need of external assistance, children see themselves as being active members of a community in resistance, with strength in store for inspiring others in other parts of the world.

## Conclusion

As we have seen in this paper, while trauma initially served as an aesthetic wedge creating space for the Palestinian narrative within a transnational humanitarian public sphere, trauma discourse has also closed the space of participation of Palestinian children as political actors. By focusing on individual psychological symptoms, trauma relief projects depoliticize the context of occupation. Moreover, such humanitarian aid projects pathologize Palestinian children and limit the scope of their political subjectivity, transforming them into either suffering victims or aggressive abusers. In this way, trauma relief projects problematize the psyche of Palestinian children, not the occupation itself, as the problem to be addressed. This depoliticized understanding of Palestinian childhood subjectivity likely reflects donor concerns and assumptions about childhood rather than a nuanced understanding of psychological resilience in the face of political violence. Growing evidence suggests that, as a collective experience itself, political violence necessitates collective and political forms of recovery and resiliency (Mollica 2002, Schweitzer et al. 2006, Hobfoll et al. 2007, Gilligan 2009). In the case of Palestine, as we have seen, the discourse of trauma imposes a ready-made set of responses which emphasize individual self-expression as a form of healing, eschewing other possible

experiences apart from personal suffering such as collective steadfastness (*sumud*), empowerment and resistance.

Nevertheless, as this paper has also demonstrated, children interpret violence, suffering and resiliency in very different ways. Specifically, we have seen that children perform the discourses of individual healing and empowerment in the face of violence and suffering, but they do so in a way that emphasizes the political context of occupation and collective resistance. Finally, in a similar move, we see the way that Palestinian children invert the geographic imaginary of humanitarian aid, by understanding themselves as political actors who can assist and act in solidarity with other children around the world. As Rancière (2010) reminds us, though human rights are 'sent abroad along with medicine and clothes to people deprived of medicine, clothes and rights' like old clothes donated to the poor, these rights are nevertheless 'not empty' and never 'merely void,' but always potentially filled, and made meaningful, 'by somebody or something else' (72). We have seen how Palestinian children put notions of trauma, relief and resiliency into practice in ways that strengthen, rather than limit, a capacity for resistance.

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## Figures



Figure 1. Boys play football in an alleyway in Balata Refugee Camp.



Figure 2. Graffiti in Balata Camp. Although the slogan written in Arabic expresses solidarity with political prisoners, the girls and boys in this research read this photo as a symbol of Palestinians' skills and creativity.